



**WMRC Article**

08 January 2004

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**CONTENTS**

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International Coalition  
Establishes 'Proliferation  
Security Initiative', to Disrupt  
Illegal Arms Trade

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## Global: International Coalition Establishes 'Proliferation Security Initiative', to Disrupt Illegal Arms Trade

*A US-led group of 11 nations has agreed to increase intelligence-sharing and to begin training their militaries to intercept shipments which are suspected of carrying weapons of mass destruction and other illegally-traded arms.*

WMRC Perspective	
<b>Significance</b>	International treaties already exist to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and illegal arms trading, but this marks the first time a group of nations has agreed to specifically enforce the provisions of those treaties, effectively increasing pressure on states actively seeking such weapons to negotiate a settlement with the international community.
<b>Implications</b>	Interdiction of foreign vessels in international waters under the Proliferation Security Initiative may provoke states that have admitted to having such programmes - such as North Korea and Iran - into direct, violent conflict with the initiative's members.
<b>Outlook</b>	WMRC believes that the Proliferation Security Initiative will eventually lead to joint direct action against suspected shipments of illegal weapons or materials into rogue states such as North Korea and Iran, putting greater pressure on those states to move more rapidly towards a negotiated settlement, and will further disrupt terrorist efforts to obtain such weapons.

### Rhetoric Turns into Action

A two-day conference in Brisbane, Australia, has resulted in an unprecedented multinational effort to more directly combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction around the world. Eleven countries (the US, Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) created the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), having agreed to increase their level of co-operation through intelligence-sharing and, eventually, joint direct action to intercept shipments of weapons that violate international treaties. The PSI, borne primarily out of the international community's inability to prevent states from obtaining the means to create or use weapons of mass destruction (WMD), follows a summit of the 11 countries (plus Canada) in June that resulted in the 'Madrid Initiative' - an agreement to change international law that would enable ships and aircraft suspected of involvement in illegal activities to be stopped and searched on the high seas. The PSI's interdiction strategy is primarily intended to halt the proliferation of WMD, but will also strive to stem the flow of other illegal arms shipments, or consignments that would pose a threat to the international community. The concerted effort by these countries represents the first such effort since the formal establishment of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970, and is a step towards direct intervention to prevent states from possessing or further developing suspected nuclear weapons capabilities. However, it is also a result of the growing threat posed by international terrorist groups, and their efforts to obtain and use WMD.

### Emerging Threats: North Korea, Iran, Terrorism

Although the official plans of the PSI did not specifically name either North Korea or Iran as targets of potential interdictions by the coalition, recent events clearly point to the actions and admissions of the two countries as driving the need for more direct action by the international community. Concern over North Korean efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon turned into an international priority when officials in their government admitted to having nuclear weapons in November 2002, and was intensified by their subsequent withdrawal from the NPT in January 2003 (see **North Korea: 10 January 2003: Pyongyang Withdraws from Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty**). On 9 July 2003, South Korean intelligence officials reported that they had detected roughly 70 high-explosive detonations, a possible indication that the country is developing the means to use small nuclear weapons. Iran provoked international criticism when the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report in early-June 2003, expressing 'concern' over some of Iran's 'undeclared nuclear activities'. Those concerns became more serious when, in same week that the IAEA produced evidence that Iran had created elements for a nuclear weapon, such as uranium metal and a heavy-water research reactor, Iran admitted to testing its 1,300km-range Shahab-3 missile. Thus far, the efforts by the international community to engage both countries diplomatically have been unsuccessful, and there is real concern that the suspected efforts of both countries to obtain such weapons will continue virtually unabated unless the PSI takes immediate steps to prevent them. Adding to the challenge

associated with WMD is the threat posed by any number of terrorist groups, led by al-Qaida, that are also actively seeking weapons of mass destruction.

### **How the Proliferation Security Initiative Might Work**

The officials at the Brisbane meeting did not release details about how the PSI would conduct its work, nor did they specify how the plan for interdiction - the most controversial aspect of the PSI - would be carried out, other than that it would begin with greater intelligence-sharing and training of military personnel. However, the following scenario is a plausible example of how an interdiction may be carried out, if the need arose:

- Given the inherent challenges of transporting arms by air and land - their weight and bulk, and the ease with which a higher-level of scrutiny can be established at international airports and overland border crossings - the primary mode of transportation will be by sea;
- Tracking the sea-faring transport of illegal arms is difficult, because of the vastness of the ocean and the number of unofficial, secluded places a ship could dock to either pick up or drop off illegal materials;
- Interdiction of illegal shipments on the sea, once identified, is easier however, and the laws governing international waters is more ambiguous than the laws of a sovereign state, if the action were to take place on land;
- Intelligence assets - now likely to include US or Australian customs and law enforcement officials - receive a tip or observe suspicious cargo being loaded onto a ship in a foreign port suspected to be the source or gateway for illegal weapons;
- The information is shared among the 11 member countries of the PSI;
- An inter-governmental working group of intelligence agencies analyses the intelligence against existing information, including the origin and history of the ship, other items on the manifest, and the sender and receiver of the suspicious cargo;
- Assuming the cargo is still considered suspect, US spy satellites and possibly unmanned aerial drones will track the movements and activities of the ship;
- Once the ship is in international waters and confirmed to be heading to a state suspected of attempting to develop WMD capabilities or illegally obtain other weapons, a coalition of forces in the area will be dispatched to intercept the ship and inspect its contents;
- If the existence of illegal arms is confirmed, the ship will either be turned back or the contents seized.

Unlike, for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the US Navy conducted a total blockade of all Soviet cargo ships attempting to enter Cuba, the PSI will most likely be limited to specific vessels whose contents are deemed suspect based on available intelligence. The difference between the two methods is significant, because it is more politically defensible to interdict only those vessels that are suspected of carrying illegal cargo than any and all ships approaching a particular country of concern. The total blockade method is also more likely to provoke certain states to react with violence. However, the PSI method is perhaps more operationally challenging, since it is highly dependent on successful intelligence-gathering at the origin of the cargo being shipped. A recent example of the targeted interdiction method already having been employed is when US and Spanish forces intercepted a ship carrying Scud missiles from North Korea to Yemen in December 2002. The Cambodian-flagged vessel was tracked by US intelligence sources for several weeks, most likely via spy satellite, before a nearby Spanish frigate was requested to detain the ship - then in the Indian Ocean - until US inspectors arrived. However, although US inspectors found the Scuds hidden under bags of cement, they released the ship, citing the absence of proper authority under international law to prevent the ship from reaching Yemen. Despite the political reasons why the US allowed the missiles to be delivered - related to Yemen's co-operation in the US-led war on terrorism - the example highlights the need for legitimacy in order for actions to be carried out under the PSI.

### **Complexities of the PSI**

The US-led PSI did not even pretend to involve any official international intergovernmental institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, the IAEA or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The type of actions being proposed under the PSI, like the interception of the Scuds between North Korea and Yemen, are not necessarily allowable under international law. It will not always be crystal clear that an international treaty has been violated before direct action will be taken under the PSI. Besides, because North Korea, for example, has recently renounced its previous endorsement of the NPT, what international law prevents them from attempting to obtain nuclear weapons? The law concerning the proposed actions that are possible under the PSI is unclear, but the 11-member countries are hoping that their number will grow, and that as they grow, as will their legitimacy to take any action they see fit. Another perhaps more immediate concern is that direct action by the US or another country's navy against North Korean vessels could provoke the unstable leadership of the Stalinist state to react with violence, further escalating a volatile situation.

## Outlook and Implications

Proliferation of WMD represents one of the biggest risks to global security. Whether they are obtained by rogue states or, even worse, a terrorist organisation, there is no doubt that WMD poses a very real and very serious threat. The inability of the international community to prevent proliferation at the state level, despite the existence of treaties and co-operative agreements, calls for a more practical and direct strategy of intervention. The Proliferation Security Initiative, although fraught with risks and unanswered questions, is a step in the right direction, if the international community is going to be able to prevent needles from finding their way into a haystack. The mere threat of the interdiction of vessels containing illegal materials may force states such as North Korea and Iran to negotiate an end to their nuclear programmes, but it is more likely that they will have to be 'caught in the act' before succumbing to international pressure. On the other hand, terrorist organisations intent on obtaining such weapons will present a more formidable challenge, as a result of their decentralisation and their ability to operate in a number of geographic locations, regardless of national borders. The immediate stimulus for the PSI may be state-level proliferation, but the long-term need is fuelled by the presence of enemies that can't be seen or sanctioned.

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